

## **BIG WORDS series: Redemption/Regeneration**

In the early years after the Second World War, it was fairly easy for people living in East Germany, which was under communist control, to migrate to the West. In fact, for several years, people would live on one side and work on the other, or just pick up their goods and leave. On May 26, 1952, any movement between the two areas became more difficult. A ten-metre wide ploughed strip was created along the entire length of this “inner border” between the two Germanies and an adjoining “protective strip” was cleared of trees and brush so that guards could see if anyone was trying to escape, although the propaganda of the day was that they were doing all this to try to keep people out, especially spies and other menaces.

In addition, a further strip 5 kilometres wide was created in which only those holding a special permit could live or work. Over 8,000 East Germans living near the border were forced to resettle farther east and another 3,000 saw the writing on the wall and escaped before the border was completely closed. In the 1960's this border became fortified and was made increasingly secure during the 1970's and 80's. In the 1960's, there were roughly 1,000 successful escapes from East Germany to the West each year, but, with the increased security, that number dropped to 120 a year by the late 1970's.

But there was another way out, not so well known and not for many -- the way of ransom. The West German government paid over 3.4 billion deutschmarks between 1964 and 1989 to ransom over 33,000 political prisoners, some 215,000 people who had been separated from their families and others. The program was called *Freikauf* which means “the buying of freedom”. A doctor's freedom was valued at 11,250 DM, while a labourer had a ransom value of 1875 DM (1/6). Often the payments were made in commodities that were in short supply in East Germany, such as oranges, bananas, coffee and medical drugs.

This act of paying a ransom so that someone can become free is called redemption. One of the great Old Testament stories of redemption comes from the book of Hosea. The story, as I'm sure you all remember from a few months ago, is that God told Hosea to marry a prostitute as a picture of His faithful love towards Israel. After bearing three children, Hosea's wife left him and, apparently, returned to her former life. At the least she had an affair and had lived with another man. But then God says to Hosea:

*Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes. So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. (Hosea 3:1,2)*

Hosea paid a ransom price because his wife had sold herself into slavery, to be the concubine slave in another man's home.

There are some important things for us to take notice of in this passage:

1. Hosea's wife is not named in chapter three although she is named in chapter one. This suggests that she has lost her identity, the identity she had as Hosea's wife and the mother of their children. She was unfaithful to the marriage, just as Israel had been unfaithful to their God and had broken the covenant with Him. Both, then, had lost their identity - Gomer as Hosea's wife and Israel as God's people. Israel, as verse 1 makes clear, prefers to show her love to other gods and the sacred raisin cakes. This doesn't refer to the very common cakes of raisins that were the Israelites' version of an energy bar, but to the offering of raisin cakes to the pagan gods and to the immoral sexual practices that went along with that pagan worship.

2. Hosea is not asked to show his displeasure, his disgust at his wife's behavior, but is asked to once more show her love. He does not berate her for her failures, but does, in verse 3, put limits on her behavior from now on.

*You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you.*

The focus here is on the future, not on the past. The purpose of Hosea's redemption of his unfaithful wife is not punishment, but restoration.

3. The third thing to notice about this act is that it is a picture to Israel of how God is looking at His nation, His people. He is showing them their future, the exile or abandonment, that is still to come, followed by their whole-hearted return to their God:

*For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol. (3:4)*

This refers to exile, to being removed from the place where people had access to the religious experience that they had been brought up with, but which would soon be beyond their reach.

*Afterward the Israelites will return and seek Yahweh their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to His blessings in the last days. (3:5)*

Let's summarize the picture portrayed in Hosea 3. God tells Hosea to go and redeem his wayward wife, to buy her back from slavery, not with words of judgment and rebuke, but with love and tenderness. This is a picture of God's love for Israel, His desire to see her return to Him and His willingness to show mercy to a people who have fallen in love with false gods and the practices of paganism.

In short, God is a lover, not a hater. He is a judge, but not a harsh or cruel one. The clear emphasis is He is Redeemer. Some of the Old Testament writers pick up this theme and describe God as a Redeemer. In the Psalms, both David and Asaph do this on more than one occasion.

(David: 19, 103; Asaph: 74, 77, 78)

And some of the prophets do this as well, notably Hosea and Jeremiah. I'll mention one verse from Jeremiah because it links ransom and redeem together:

*For the LORD will ransom Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they. (33:11)*

The prophet says that God will pay the ransom price for His people Israel and will take

them out from under the control of others and into freedom. They will belong to Him once more, no longer under an enemy's oppression.

Why does God have to do this? Why can't I take hold of this challenge and pay the ransom price for my own life?

The answer is given in Psalm 49:

*No one can redeem the life of another, or give to God a ransom for him -- the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough that one should live on forever and not see decay (49:7-9)*

This sets us up for when we come to the New Testament, and we see just how costly the ransom price is for any human life. This is not a matter of 11,000 deutschmarks or 1800, but the cost is the Son of God giving up His life to pay the ransom price, the redemption price, to cover all our sin. In fact, before the crucifixion, Jesus referred to Himself as our ransom price. This from Matthew 20:

*Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave -- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.*  
(Matthew 20:26-28)

This is the humility of Jesus, through whom the universe was created, to whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. I didn't come to be served by you, but to serve you, to allow my life to be paid out as a ransom for your lives." And He says the same thing in various ways throughout the gospels:

*Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The one who loves his life will lose it, while the person who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*  
(John 12:24,25)

The point is that Jesus came to earth with purpose, and it was a redemptive, saving, restoring purpose ... for us. The Christian writer, Elisabeth Elliot, who passed away just two months ago, once wrote this about our redemption:

*We want to avoid suffering, death, sin, ashes. But we live in a world crushed and broken and torn, a world God Himself visited to redeem. We receive His poured-out life, and being allowed the high privilege of suffering with Him, may then pour ourselves out for others.*

Jesus is, once again, both our redeemer and our example for how we can be His followers.

Our second BIG WORD for this week is "regeneration". It's a word that doesn't appear in translations such as the NIV or New Living or ESV or RSV. But it does appear in the King James and in the New American Standard Bible and the ideas that this word conveys are very evident in Scripture.

In your biology class in high school, you will have learned that organisms have the capacity to regenerate, to reform tissues that have been damaged or even removed. Here are pictures of a newt producing a new limb after one had been severed - and

doing it in less than three months.

This gives us a picture of spiritual regeneration which is defined in the New Bible Dictionary as the change which the Holy Spirit brings about in the life of a believer. Things that were dead or dying, or things in our life that were leading us towards death -- like sin, like rebellion against God and His purposes for our lives -- are being cleaned out and life is being poured in by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. That's regeneration: the old is done away with and the new is brought in.

Let's look at some of the places where this idea or image is found in the New Testament. First, we'll look quickly at the two places in which the word "regeneration" appears in the New American Standard and King James versions. The first is Matthew 19:28:

*And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you shall also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."*

The word here is *palingenesia* and if you break that down into two parts, the word *palin* means "again, once more, anew" and the word *genesis*, from which the word *genesis* comes, means "birth". So Jesus is saying here that the whole cosmos will experience a rebirth, that there will be a time of general renewal, when everything will be changed. That's why the NIV, for example, translates this verse:

*I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones ..."*

The phrase "the renewal of all things" captures this idea of rebirth and applies it to all of creation.

The other use of *palingenesia* in the New Testament is focussed on the renewal of the individual:

*He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)*

That's a picture of being born again, of experiencing an inner, spiritual renewal that transforms our lives. Here, Paul uses the word "washing" to describe this work of regeneration, and he is probably referring to the baptism through which we declare our loyalty to Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The bigger story of the new birth comes from Jesus' famous conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, where the teacher tells His student that, if he wants to enter eternal life, he must be born again.

*Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, Nicodemus starts out. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.*

*In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.:*

*"How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second*

*time into his mother's womb to be born?"*

*"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." (3:2-5)*

In this case, the reference to water is most likely to physical birth, not to baptism. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that, in addition to physical birth, there must be a spiritual birth before we can enter God's Kingdom. In other words, you can't just be born, grow up and do the best you can with what you were given and still expect to see God. There has to be a regeneration, a rebirth. Something new has to happen. And Jesus is opening Nicodemus' understanding so that he can see his need for this spiritual rebirth.

If there was any doubt that Jesus was talking about a spiritual rebirth, He makes it very clear in the verse that follows:

*"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at My saying, 'You must be born again.'" (3:6,7)*

What are the changes that regeneration brings about? To answer that question, we need only look at a few Bible verses that tell us what the Spirit's work is in our lives: A key text for understanding regeneration is in Paul's second letter to the Christians in Corinth. We'll look at two passages, starting with chapter 5, then, chapter 3:

*Those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun! All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to Himself through what Christ did.*

When Murray and I were pastoring at New Life Community Church in Burnaby, one of the women in our church wrote a song that we used to sing very often: "Behold if any man be in Christ, the old is gone and the new has come. Because of Jesus' sacrifice, we are a new creation." The life in the Spirit is new life! Now, 3:18

*All of us have had the veil removed so that we can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like Him and reflect His glory even more.*

I used Jesus' teaching about the kernel of wheat falling into the ground under the heading of redemption, but it's even more appropriate here. The goal of a seed, let's use the sunflower seed as an example, is not simply to produce more seeds, and therefore more Spitz, but to produce sunflowers, to duplicate the original. In the same way we, who have put our hope in Christ, are called to become more and more like Him, so that the world around us can see Jesus, so they can get to know Him and actually invite His Spirit into their lives as well.

That's the expectation for a rebirth. Regeneration produces a new life that doesn't look just like the old life that kept falling short of the glory of God. The new life is the life that is empowered by the Holy Spirit, who is at work in us to make us appear more and more like Jesus. Notice that the passage doesn't describe instant results, although most of us experience some pretty dramatic changes in our lives when we first start to follow Jesus. Rather, it describes a process, a process in which we are

transformed, we are changed to be more and more like Him and reflect His glory even more. Those phrases - 'more and more' and 'even more' - are phrases that describe a process.

Now, most important for our application, what part do we play in the process? Let's see now:

- the Christian becomes a new person, a new life has begun and all this newness is from God.
- all of us have had the veil removed, which means that we didn't remove it. The veil that blinded us to the truth of Jesus Christ has been taken from us.
- we become more and more like Jesus "as the Spirit of the Lord works within us". We can't make ourselves like Jesus; this is something only God can do, by His Spirit.

So, what is our responsibility in all this? It sounds like an automatic thing that we have no control over, either to help or to hinder the process. But that's not the whole counsel of Scripture, and I want us to close this study by revisiting a passage in Galatians 5 that talks about how to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives:

*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (Gal 5:25)*

The image is one of ballroom dancing, with one partner leading and the other "keeping in step", following as grace-fully and skillfully as possible. Our "keeping in step" with the leading of the Spirit is as simple as learning to follow His lead. He knows what we need. He knows what will turn out the very best for us in the long term. He is the fully competent leader, the one we need in our lives, but we have to be willing and able to follow His lead. We have to say, "Yes, Lord, yes, Lord, yes, yes, Lord", even when we think we have a better idea. We have to be willing to do things we don't understand and for which we can't predict an outcome, especially one as pleasant as the outcome we would prefer. But saying, "Yes" to the Spirit is saying "yes" to positive change, to being conformed to the image of Christ, to seeing the fruit of regeneration in our lives -- with more and more glory going to God because of what we allow the Spirit to do in us.